

# BLUEPRINTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES -- STRATEGIES FOR SHAPING LIVABLE PLACES

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**REFERENCE:** *Proceedings of the 1997 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held March 20-22, 1997, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Institute of Ecology, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

**Abstract.** Throughout its 30-year history, The Georgia Conservancy has invested considerable resources in issues related to sustainability. One of the most ambitious projects that we've undertaken is the initiative known as Blueprints for Successful Communities - a program which focuses on land use and transportation alternatives which are sustainable, both environmentally and economically.

In the course of this discussion I would like to do three things:

- (1) Give you a better understanding of why an organization like The Georgia Conservancy is devoting so many of its resources now to land use and transportation;
- (2) Highlight a few of the economic, environmental and political implications of our traditional method of comprehensive planning in Georgia; and
- (3) Leave you with a sense of urgency about why we need to drastically rethink our land use and transportation planning policies in Georgia.

## COMMUNITY

How many of you are familiar with the Five-Minute Popsicle Rule? Believe it or not, if most Americans could live by the Five-Minute Popsicle Rule our environment would be healthier, our cities and towns would run like clock work and our wallets would be fatter. For those of you who don't know about the Five-Minute Popsicle Rule, it originated at the University of Texas Architecture School. According to the rule, American neighborhoods would be healthier places to live if a child could walk safely from home to buy a popsicle within five minutes. What would this really accomplish? It would recreate the community and freedom we enjoyed before we separated every land use by rigid zoning and became totally dependent on automobiles.

Think for a moment, if you will, about the American landscape. James Kunstler, author of the book, *Home from Nowhere* and the keynote speaker at The Georgia Conservancy's recent 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, said it well. "We drive up and down the gruesome suburban boulevards of commerce," he said, "and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome and stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight." "Fry pits, lube joints, parking lagoons," as he calls them, "and the uproar of signs." And as he so eloquently understated, "this experience can make us feel kind of glum." Why is that? It goes back to the reason for creating the Five-Minute Popsicle Rule. Americans long for the sense of community, freedom, safety and sense of place and scale

that existed 50 years ago. Sadly, the baby boomers are probably the last generation to have any real recollection of that sort of life, but today old and young alike are suffering the social, economic and environmental ills that our way of designing towns and neighborhoods has wrought.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Georgia is a state of remarkable natural diversity: I heard someone say recently that Georgia's cash crop is its natural landscape. But unfortunately, Georgia's landscape is going the way of many other metropolitan areas in this country. Many of Georgia's and the nation's most serious environmental problems are a direct result of improper land use.

The Chattahoochee River is one of the 10 most endangered rivers in the country, a river that supplies about 70% of our drinking water and where we are dumping, unhappily, too much of our waste. The Chattahoochee River suffers from urban stormwater runoff, much of which results from poor development practices. In Georgia, 67% of monitored waters do not meet water quality standards. Polluted runoff and wetlands destruction are among the biggest threats to Georgia's water resources. Water scarcity is an issue both in our mountains and on our coast. Georgia is presently negotiating with the states of Alabama and Florida over the limited water in the Chattahoochee, Flint, Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers. On the coast, the over-pumping of the aquifer has resulted in salt water intrusion. This water scarcity is compounded by water pollution from municipalities and industries, and runoff from agriculture and urban areas.

We have an air problem in Atlanta, too. It's not industrial pollution anymore. It's the automobile. Atlantans drive an average of 34 miles a day, the highest rate in the nation. And despite the fact that automobile engines burn 98% cleaner than those of the 1970's, more cars traveling twice as much have led to severe air pollution problems in the region. Because Atlanta has failed to take ample steps to meet federal clean air standards, road projects across the region have been halted. According to the Centers for Disease Control, automobile emissions from our cars greatly exacerbates respiratory problems for children and the elderly. Additionally, Georgia Tech has found that Georgia's air pollution problem results in crop yield losses of \$175 million each year.

More importantly, we've been profligate in our use of land. Our traditional land use strategies have led to urban sprawl which requires us to use the car almost every time we step out the front

door. It requires us to cut trees and destroy existing neighborhoods to build roads to serve new neighborhoods that are farther and farther away. With urban sprawl, we needlessly overuse resources and increase pollution at the same time.

The sprawl-like development that is creeping across Georgia and particularly the Atlanta region, is replacing sleepy rural towns and acres of rich farmland and forests with strip shopping centers and suburban subdivisions. Atlanta was once known as the green city, in reference to its amazing tree canopy. But since 1972, Atlanta's urban forest has declined by 65% causing the city to heat up at an alarming rate, creating what is known as "urban heat islands." Elevated temperatures, in turn, cause a low pressure area in the city, trapping hot air and pollution.

### CHANGING COURSE

At The Georgia Conservancy, we believe that all land use stakeholders should develop a sense of urgency about our land use practices for a number of environmental and economic reasons. Because we believe that environmental protection and economic development have to go hand in hand, we are concerned that the economic consequences of traditional planning strategies have the potential of putting many local governments in a crisis situation when it comes to paying for the infrastructure required to service sprawling communities.

We all recognize the symptoms and many of you have read *Newsweek's* article a few years ago, "Bye Bye Suburbia." Those in the planning and economic development fields are probably familiar with the Bank of America's report on sprawl in California which concluded that sprawl has created enormous costs that California can no longer afford. Unchecked sprawl has shifted from an engine of California's growth to a force that now threatens to inhibit growth and degrade quality of life.

Amazingly, at The Georgia Conservancy we believe there is reason for hope, hope that the Atlanta region will get a grip on growth and begin to grow smarter than we have over the past 50 years. The entire country is watching to see how our state will handle its rapid population growth over the next 20 years, and if our leadership can step up to the plate to help us avoid the California experience.

One of our greatest reasons for hope is that there is a different type of conversation floating around our region today when it comes to growth management. In 1995, the Conservancy held its first Blueprints for Successful Communities program. Our guest speaker was architect and planner Anton Nelessen, who was recently hired by the Midtown Alliance to help design a plan for Midtown Atlanta. Over the course of the next year and a half, we held five different programs focusing on land use, urban design, transportation planning, regional cooperation, cost of sprawl issues and sustainability. During that time period we brought together over 1,000 builders, developers, bankers, architects, planners and local government officials to examine alternative land use and transportation strategies which could be applied to the Atlanta region. We were happy to learn that these audiences, like us, realized that "business as usual" in this region won't sustain us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES

If our traditional land use patterns of decentralized, low density, sprawl-like development are creating both environmental and economic problems for us, what options do we have? How do we continue to grow and make it possible for us to live comfortably and work efficiently without driving an average of 12,000 miles per year as we do now? Are there ways to create communities which make efficient use of land and which are less expensive to serve? Can we grow as a region without redundancy and conflict among local governments? Can we ensure economic viability without diffusing public infrastructure investments? Can we maintain our urban core which is truly the economic heart of the entire region?

Yes, but it will require a shift in the pendulum. That is already happening in some respects. The results of one the most powerful community planning tools, known as the Visual Preference Survey, in which citizens view around 200 images of various land uses and structure designs, has proven that American taste and preference is swinging back to tradition. More and more people are feeling a sense of nostalgia toward the type of communities that existed in this country before World War II. Most people do not like the current land use patterns of subdivisions with look-alike houses dominated by garage doors and driveways. Most prefer compact, efficient communities integrated with shops, homes, schools and other public activity centers within a five-minute walk of each other. Sounds like the Popsicle Rule again, doesn't it? The most preferred community qualities include pedestrian-scale development, narrow streets with sidewalks and shade trees, community greenspace, front porches and the corner store. People want to get out of their cars.

They want to walk to the corner store; they want to take safe transit to work; they want their child to be able to ride a bike to soccer practice. They long for a sense of community, of belonging. At The Georgia Conservancy, we refer to these communities as Successful Communities because they are successful in preserving the natural environment and because they are successful economically. In short, Successful Communities share these characteristics:

- They have narrower, treelined streets, with on-street parking and sidewalks.
- They have different sized houses, with front porches close enough to the sidewalk that you can actually talk to a neighbor.
- They are communities built for people, not for cars.
- They are mixed use, with neighborhood restaurants, drug stores, and grocery stores that you can walk to.
- Streets are in a grid design and actually go somewhere.
- Traffic is slower and more dispersed.
- These communities use less land, they reuse existing facilities and services can be delivered more efficiently.
- These communities encourage walking, biking and public transportation.

## BENEFITS

How do these kinds of communities impact the natural environment? They do so in very beneficial ways. Because these communities are more conducive to walking, biking and transit, air quality is improved. While everyone benefits from cleaner air, the big winners are children and the elderly. Additionally, if two car families could give up one car as result of living in a pedestrian-friendly community, they could save as much as \$7,000 a year.

Because these communities are more compact, there is less impervious surface resulting in less downstream flooding and scouring of stream banks. When these communities incorporate the natural landscape into the overall community design, existing wetlands, open spaces and other important natural areas can cleanse water naturally and reduce stormwater volume and associated pollutants. A study done in South Carolina by Dr. Liz Blood of the Jones Ecological Research Center demonstrated that compact, transit and pedestrian oriented developments were better for water quality and had less stormwater runoff. These benefits were gained by reducing the amount of land altered, reducing the amount of pavement and roads constructed, and localizing impervious surfaces.

Greenspaces, which are an essential element of these communities, are necessary to provide valuable habitat to preserve Georgia's stunning natural heritage. There are presently 67 threatened or endangered species in Georgia. The reduced sprawl achieved through more compact communities lessens the pressures on such species as the bald eagle, red cockaded woodpecker and others.

In addition to freeing up \$7,000 in family income, these communities offer other economic benefits. Sprawl-like development may seem unrelated to the topic of tax burdens, but this is far from the case. Suburban sprawl consumes many more tax dollars than Successful Communities. An extra-ordinary amount of tax dollars are expended to build and maintain the highways and streets that crisscross our state. Also, the taxes needed to supply water and sewer service are greatly increased when servicing low density decentralized suburbs that are far from service centers. A 1992 study by Rutgers University comparing compact development in New Jersey to suburban sprawl noted that \$1.38 billion in capital costs could be saved in roads, water supply, sewer and other local government services over 20 years, if Successful Communities formed the basis of new development.

## LOCAL PLANNING

If visual preference surveys tell us that people want to live in these kinds of places, why are they difficult to find? There are many reasons for the decentralized land uses in place today and, of late, there has been much finger pointing with regard to whose responsible for maddening traffic congestion, long commutes and isolated suburban developments. As Jessica Mathews wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Americans are not irrationally car-crazed. We seem wedded to the automobile because policy after government policy...encourages us to be." For example, many of

Atlanta suburbs are practically non-negotiable on foot. Several major counties have no public transit. Ordinances requiring amazing amounts of parking and exaggerated setback requirements combined with a prohibition on mixed uses make it virtually impossible to free us from our cars.

Now, back to reasons for hope. Since the Blueprints for Successful Communities project was launched in 1995, dozens of local governments and community groups have solicited our help in integrating the Successful Communities principles into their local planning efforts. A number of groups have requested assistance with community based planning efforts such as the Visual Preference Survey. More and more people are realizing that they can shape their community by choice, not by chance. When the proposed Mall of Georgia was discussed recently by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), a dialogue occurred which was of historic significance. First of all, the fact that any dialogue occurred at all over this development of regional impact is important to note. But of even greater significance was the fact that some members of the ARC were questioning the impact upon the REGION that such an automobile-oriented project will have. "In an area with severe air pollution problems, is it prudent to encourage a project that will exacerbate traffic congestion and increase automobile emissions?" they asked. "Mall sprawl" was the term coined by local homeowners opposed to the project. Unfortunately, the ARC did, in the end, give its blessings to the project, but for the first time in history, the merits of decentralized, auto-dependent development were called into question.

These Successful Communities are not perfect. They won't solve all of our problems, but they are sustainable. Sustainability is not primarily an environmental issue. It's an economic issue, a growth and development issue. It argues for a pattern of growth that allows us to keep going by maximizing our use of our natural resources instead of wasting them. Sustainability means you do things in such a way that you get to keep doing them. All Successful Communities are sustainable. They work today for us, tomorrow for our children, and then for our grandchildren.